

Entangled Species: The Inclusive Posthumanist Ecopoetics of Juliana Spahr

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Abstract

In her most recent collection, Well Then There Now (2011), Juliana Spahr promotes an inclusive posthumanist ethics by composing poetry that adopts the complex patterns of nature, a poetry that models the shared, connective spaces we inhabit with others. Reacting to our contemporary moment of intense globalization and economic imperialism, and the environmental changes accompanying these giant social forces, Spahr conducts investigations of and through language in order to become more fully aware of the interconnections between self and others; and between self, others and environment, including how material interconnections shape our social and cultural conditions. Through her signature use of Steinian repetition and parataxis—alongside a process of cutting up, hashing, and recycling text—Spahr looks critically at the systemic intersection of all organisms, including the artificial or non-living other. As this essay argues, by emphasizing points of convergence between human, machine, and animal, Spahr’s inclusive poetics teaches us how to live intersectionally with respect and regard for other species, and encourages us to acknowledge our existence as co-existence.

In her 2007 essay, “What is Experimental Poetry & Why Do We Need It?” Joan Retallack calls for a poetic reinvestigation of “our species’ relation to other inhabitants of the fragile and finite territory,” inhabitants that “our species named, claimed, exploited, sentimentalized, and aggrandized.” Retallack urges poets to reconceptualize “nature poetry” because non-human “others have been fatefully excluded from a review of our intentions but not from their consequences. That is, they (trees, birds, other animals, grasses, rivers.....) experience but cannot imagine us. We imagine but too often do not really experience them.” Instead of trying to imagine or “describe nature through our emotions,” Retallack recommends writing experimental poetry that “adopts nature’s manner of operation.” Instead of attempting to

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know what we cannot possibly know, experimenting with chance language patterns brings us closer to the reality of the material world by mimicking “the chaotic interconnectedness of all things, the dynamic pattern-bounded indeterminacy in which we find ourselves.” Part of the Washington D.C. group of first generation Language poets, Retallack understands dominant linguistic structures as contributing to notions of the human as separate from the natural. By inventing “new interrelationships among subjects, vocabularies, [and] literary devices,” poetic experiment becomes a useful method for understanding relations differently.

Lynn Keller also views linguistically experimental poetry as a welcome alternative to the usual anthropocentric self-centered “nature” poetry. In her chapter on “Green Reading” in *The Oxford Handbook of Modern and Contemporary Poetry*, Keller urges eco-critics to pay more attention to the environmental possibilities of avant-garde poetics. As Keller notes, this type of innovative poetry is valuable to discussions surrounding the environment because it focuses “less on individual encounters with nature and more on collective modes of inhabiting the earth” (611). Other differences between experimental ecopoetry and traditional nature poetry cited by Keller include experimental poetry’s engagement with physics and chaos theory alongside an interest in considering the complex environmental impacts of industry, globalization and colonization, while at the same time, remaining unopposed to modernization and technology.¹ Like Retallack, Keller also claims linguistic experiment can liberate us “from the inherited modes of thinking that have brought us to the environmental mess in which we find ourselves” (611).

Both Retallack and Keller list Juliana Spahr among their examples of poets currently engaging in experimental modes of ecopoetic production. Both cite Spahr’s long poem “Things of Each Possible Relation Hashing Against One Another” as an example of a poem that “adopts nature’s manner of operation” (Retallack) by weaving words into complicated patterns that approximate “the shapes of things around her” (Keller, “Green Reading” 620). Originally published as a chapbook in 2003, “Things of Each Possible Relation” is included in Spahr’s most recent collection of poetry, *Well Then There Now*, among other experimental poems that call attention to the complex relationships and interactions between human and non-human others, between the material and the semiotic, and between the large global systems of economics, geography, politics, and language that contribute to the shaping of the world of entangled multispecies.

Until recently, as Keller notes, avant-garde language-oriented poetry was seen as “inimical to ecocriticism” due to its emphasis on referentiality and the production of meaning. Discussions of reality as nothing but a ghostly “chain of signifiers” did not blend well with “[e]cocritical concerns about real-world environmental degradation,” concerns that have “fostered an insistence on nature as something that is phenomenologically real, even if in some ways culturally constructed” (Keller, “Green Reading” 604). However, second and third generation language poets, including Juliana Spahr, are expanding the scope of the avant-garde.² In the 2001 inaugural issue of *ecopoetics*, editor Jonathan Skinner also admonishes avant-garde poets of the late 20th century who, despite being “noted for linguistically sophisticated approaches to difficult issues, stand to be criticized for their overall silence on a comparable approach to environmental questions” (7). The seven issues of *ecopoetics* Skinner has produced since 2001 embrace the interfusion of ecological concerns and experimental literary arts. In a recent

interview with Angela Hume, Skinner comments on the wide range of formal experimentation enfolded within ecopoetics, noting that the most important aspect of ecopoetics is “what happens *off* the page, in terms of where the work is sited and performed, as well as what methods of composition, or *decomposition*, precede and follow the poem—the modes of research, documentation, or collaboration that the work takes us and generates” (760, emphasis in original). This interest in what happens “off the page” highlights the importance of material space and embodied action, and foregrounds the poem as a material-semiotic node that *becomes with* a network of other human and non-human actors. Skinner posits ecopoetry not as a “kind” or “genre” of poetry, but as a “site” where things happen, a place where edges meet, an occupied position or location, and thus, a poetics that emphasizes the “irreducible presence of a body” (Hume 755, 760). With this in mind, Skinner has supported the publication of poetry that critiques logocentric/anthropocentric constructions of nature, but also avoids the problem of “the ghostly signifier” by underscoring the material entanglements of various bodies.

Juliana Spahr, whose work appears in two of the seven issues of *ecopoetics*, is definitely concerned with “sites” and the edges between sites where bodies intersect. In *Well Then There Now*, Spahr combines linguistic experiment with an emphasis on “the irreducible presence of the body” in order to investigate the ways in which living and non-living bodies are shaped by both material and semiotic forces. As this essay argues, Spahr promotes an inclusive posthumanist ethics by composing poetry that adopts the complex patterns of nature, a poetry that models the shared, connective spaces we inhabit with others. Reacting to our contemporary moment of intense globalization and economic imperialism, and the environmental changes accompanying these giant social forces, Spahr conducts investigations *of and through* language in order to become more fully aware of the interconnections between self and others; and between self, others and environment, including how material interconnections shape our social and cultural conditions. A veritable model of hybridity, *Well Then There Now* incorporates investigative prose, innovative sonnets, prose poems, lists, photographs, diagrams, and found data. Through her signature use of Steinian repetition and parataxis—alongside a process of cutting up, hashing, and recycling text—Spahr looks critically at the systemic intersection of all organisms, including the artificial or non-living other. By emphasizing points of convergence between human, machine, and animal, Spahr’s *inclusive poetics* teaches us how to live intersectionally with respect and regard for other species, and encourages us to acknowledge our existence as co-existence.

Spahr’s connective, inclusive poetics is highly influenced by her early interest in the work of Gertrude Stein, an interest that developed in part because of the material environment of Chillicothe, Ohio where Spahr was born and raised. In her “Poetics Statement,” Spahr writes:

The town I grew up in was ugly and dirty. The town was dirty because it had a barely environmentally regulated papermill...Because the town was dirty, whenever I read poems about the beauty of the English countryside or New England woods, they made little sense to me. So then I went and found by accident this stuff that didn’t seem to be some sort of weird lie, and because this

stuff by Stein was so weird it at the least didn't seem to be lying in the usual ways, I clung to it. (132).

Here, we see an early (even if in hindsight) understanding of Language poetry's derision toward lyrical representation and a subjective "I" that purports to be simultaneously static and universal. In her own critical study of avant-garde poetics, *Everybody's Autonomy*, Spahr praises Stein's ability to "write for everybody" by creating "connective" texts that "encourage readers to bring to them different [individual] levels of connection, of meaning, of resonance" (22-23). Spahr outlines five techniques Stein employs to achieve her inclusive, connective poetics: unusually inclusive and complex sentences "that violate the grammatical decency and segregation of the English language;" incomplete sentences or paratactic phrases; use of nonstandard qualifiers or improper verb forms; repetition; and "word confusion," or punning word play (27-30). As I demonstrate later, Spahr employs all of these Steinian techniques in her own poetry, thus inventing "new interrelationships" between subjects. Instead of modeling exclusivity and hierarchical relationships, Spahr's poems effectively become models of inclusivity and interconnectedness.

Spahr's affinity for Stein led her to study Language poetry with Charles Bernstein in the Poetics Program at SUNY Buffalo. In her short essay, "After Language Poetry," Spahr credits Bernstein with introducing her to the work of a variety of poets associated with Language writing, such as Lyn Hejinian, Ron Silliman, and Bruce Andrews. Reading the work of these poets incited Spahr to start thinking about connectivity, systems and the connective nature of systems. Spahr found great value "in writing that comments on community and that moves poetry away from individualism to shared, connective spaces. And in writing that reveals how our private intimacies have public obligations and ramifications, how intimacy has a social bond with shared meaning." Spahr's several books of poetry, her autobiography, *Transformations*, and her works of scholarly criticism all comment on our shared, connective spaces, revealing the syndetic, shaping relationships between public and private, between nature and culture.

However, Spahr's work moves beyond and apart from Stein and the Language poets in its clarity of message; her poetry carries an obvious political valence grounded not only in the exploration of semiotic constructions and shapings, but also in the interactive flux and flow of the actual material world. Unlike the Language poets who simply seek to draw attention to the *production* of meaning, leaving the "construction" largely up to the reader—and despite her love of poetic indeterminacy—Spahr wants her poems to *mean*, to make certain points not *about* meaning, but about material-semiotic shapings. She wants her poems to communicate the nature of embodiment in order to encourage ethical, responsible interactions. In the November 2012 issue of *Full Stop*, Spahr told interviewers, "I often wish [literature] were more didactic. I like it to mean things, I confess" ("Teaching in the Margins"). And in a 2005 interview with Joel Bettridge, Spahr revealed she doesn't really see her own work as belonging to "that Stein tradition of making a work that is meant to be read variably by different readers;" rather, she is "interested in contemporary writing that has taken the politics of form argument [born out of Language poetry] and used it to construct argument" (8-9). For Spahr, taking a clear stand on social responsibility is what makes poetry matter. And, as she conveyed to Bettridge,

the kind of social action she feels responsible to is directly related to her position as an American citizen:

I want to say that to not take a clear stand in your writing against empire, against the United States military industrial complex, against the repressive economic policies of the United States, against the disproportionate wealth and resource use of United States citizens seems to me to be a missed opportunity to have the writing matter in some way. (8)

Reading Spahr's last three collections of poetry, one sees how the concerns listed above deeply intertwine with environmental issues. U.S. military and economic imperialism contributes to the shaping of both human and nonhuman lives.³ The poem "gathering paolo stream," in *Fuck You—Aloha—I Love You* (2001), examines how the colonization of Hawai'i has re-shaped both the nonhuman natural world and the relationship between the nonhuman natural world and Hawai'i's indigenous people. In *this connection of everyone with lungs* (2005), a poetic response to the U.S. invasion of Iraq and Afghanistan, the speaker's perception of various U.S. military actions are always impacted by her embodied location in Hawai'i—a space shared with various nonhuman bodies.⁴ Of the three, Spahr's latest book, *Well Then There Now*, is the most overtly concerned with charting and interrogating the interrelationships between human and nonhuman others.

Practicing the politics of location, as exemplified in Spahr's poetry, essays, and numerous interviews, is the practice of accountability. Recognizing her embodied and embedded location—an act that Spahr refers to as wrestling "with what it means to be an American, or a westerner...What it means to be a part of the group of people who use up huge amounts of resources...What it means [to be a] part of the country that bombs a lot of other countries" (Adolf 409)—leads Spahr to critique and create awareness of differential power relations. Thinking about the politics of location can also help accomplish a posthumanist shift in perspective. As Rosi Braidotti claims in *Nomadic Subjects*, the feminist "politics of location" provides the foundation for understanding our subjectivity as embodied in fleshy material, for understanding the "the dissolution of the humanist subject." Braidotti describes the process as follows:

A "location," in fact, is not a self-appointed and self-designed subject position, but rather a collectively shared and constructed, jointly occupied spatiotemporal territory... "Politics of locations" are cartographies of power that rest on a form of self-criticism, a critical, genealogical self-narrative; they are relational and outside directed. This means that "embodied" accounts illuminate and transform our knowledge of ourselves and of the world. (16)

In *Well Then There Now*, Spahr presents a self-critical embodied account of her various locations while inviting the reader, via her inclusive form, to also take part in what Braidotti calls "an immanent regrounding" (16). Taking into account her location in a body with various temporal and spatial attachments, Spahr writes poetry that explores her own accountability, her own entanglements. The book's format illustrates this conceptually via Spahr's inclusion of

composition locations. The acknowledgements page at the beginning of the book includes the full street address, including zip code, where each poem or essay was written—a total of six different addresses and four different cities. The individual title pages preceding each piece also allude to composition location: the recto page depicts a grayscale silhouette of the state where the poem or essay was written while the verso page contains the piece's title and the longitude and latitude coordinates of composition location. The emphasis Spahr places on composition location indicates her understanding of interconnectedness—the way she is tied to, effects, and is affected by multiple locations—and it also indicates an understanding of the way we are influenced by all we touch and those who touch us—right down to the form and content of the poems we may write.

As Keller notes, taken as a whole, the “mapping” of *Well Then There Now's* eight sections emphasizes global connectedness, while highlighting an “eco-cosmopolitan” outlook: a shift in thinking that requires “local practices to be reconceptualized within planetary dynamics” (“Beyond” 584-585). As I demonstrate below, Spahr's inclusive poetics *does* reconceptualize and connect local ideas of place into a global space. Though most of the poems were written in Hawai'i, Spahr's mapping connects the interactive relationships between Hawai'i and the other places Spahr has visited or lived. Therefore, Spahr does not present Hawai'i as an isolated “here” in need of “fixing,” but rather as kind of “here” that, drawing on Timothy Morton, “is a mesh of entangled presences and absences, not a foundational, localist, antiglobal concept” (104).

Cumulative Repetition and the Mesh

In *The Ecological Thought*, Morton uses the figure of the mesh to explain interconnected coexistence. Morton writes, “All life forms are the mesh, and so are all dead ones, as are their habitats, which are also made up of living and non-living beings” (29). As a description of interdependence, the mesh is a useful concept for de-privileging the human, for acknowledging our dependence on the co-shaping ‘touch’ of others, and for recognizing that the boundaries between life-forms are often permeable. Thinking the mesh is “a practice and a process of becoming fully aware of how human beings are connected with other beings—animal, vegetable, or mineral” (7). This is an awareness that depends on recognizing our embodied material identity; an awareness that depends on recognizing that the world—even the ‘unreal’ world of language and consciousness—is produced by embodied action, interaction, and enaction⁵. As Cary Wolfe claims in *What is Posthumanism?*, “[T]he world is an ongoing, differentiated construction and creation of a shared environment, sometimes converging in a consensual domain, sometimes not, by autopoietic entities that have their own temporalities, chronicities, perceptual modalities, and so on—in short, their own forms of embodiment” (xxiv). The mesh *is* the shared environment where species converge, an environment created by the coming together of material bodies.

In her poetic practice, Spahr engages this ongoing process of becoming and converging through the use of cumulative repetition, cut-up, and paratactic manipulation. The first poem in the collection, “Some of We and the Land That Was Never Ours,” is an excellent example of Spahr's formal technique—a technique that highlights the exchange and interdependence of species at

all levels. Here, Spahr's method of cumulative repetition mimics the mechanism of the feedback loop as the sense of an individual line overlaps and feeds into the next, generating new and multiple meanings. This cumulative repetition creates an all-inclusive world, exposing how all species are "shaped by all of us and then other things as well, other things such as the flora and the fauna and all the other things as well" (Spahr, *This Connection* 31). Written in four prose blocks, the poem not only engages in cumulative repetition at the level of the individual line or sentence, but also at the sectional level. Just as each new line introduces a new component into the fold, so does each prose section, demonstrating how we are co-shaped by vegetable, mineral, and animal. As the poem progresses, the speaker (and the reader) engages in the process of *becoming with* other species. The first section of the poem begins:

We are all. We of all the small ones are. We are all. We of all the small ones are.
We are in this world. We are in this world. We are together. We are together.
And some of we are eating grapes. Some of we are all eating grapes. Some of we
are all eating. We are all in this world today. Some of we are eating grapes today
in this world. (11)

With the first sentence, the first word, the poem is immediately inclusive. Spahr's use of the pronoun "we" displaces the lyric "I" while acknowledging there is no "I" as such. Writing the poem from the plural point of view, Spahr affirms that neither speaker nor reader can stand outside the mesh. We are *of* the mesh along with everything else—connected and entangled. As the first sentence claims, outright and simply, "We are all." Which is to say, the "we" includes everything, not just the human. As Harriet Tarlo notes in her discussion of "eco-ethical poetics," the "ecopoetic resistance of the lyric "I" differs from the poststructuralist "destabilizing [of] the subject" (127). Spahr's use of "we" is not so much an echo of Language poetry's attack on the conventional lyric self, as it is indicative of a shift toward a more collective (or communal) perspective. Spahr's use of the collective pronoun is also a pronouncement against "the inner self/outer world distinction so dear to nature poetry" (Tarlo 127). The natural world is no longer a romantic mirror for human emotions; rather, the non-human inhabitants of the world are our collective partners in the ongoing process of creating ways of knowing.

"We of all the small ones are," the second sentence, builds on the meaning of "we," making it clear that "we" includes even the minute and unseen. When we eat a grape, we are not just interacting with the grape, we are also interacting with the various molecules within the grape—from glucose to anti-bacterial to anti-fungal. We are all. Even though the grapes introduced in the ninth sentence are physically smaller than the human figure; the grape, the seed, the skin—the fermenting process of grape into wine and the wine mixing alcohol into our blood—are all components of "we" interacting with each other. But, "We of all the small ones are," does not simply mean that humans must acknowledge their relationship with "the small ones." Spahr's odd grammatical structure, coupled with the repetitive parataxis gives the phrase double meaning. Yes, we must acknowledge the important role played by smaller units of life and non-life, but we must also acknowledge our own smallness. We, the human speaker and the human reader, are no more or less significant than any other entity in the mesh. Thus,

the repetition of “we of all the small ones are” de-privileges the human from his place at the center—or top—illustrating that interconnectedness is not hierarchical.

As the poem continues, the meaning of “we” compounds and accumulates with each new sentence. As mentioned above, in the ninth sentence (or third line), two new properties are introduced into the loop, the pronoun “some” and the noun “grapes”:

We are together. And some of we are eating grapes. Some of we are all eating grapes. Some of we are all eating. We are all in this world today. Some of we are eating grapes today in this world. (11)

Some is not everybody, but *some* is still part of the “we.” *Some* is not everybody, but is more inclusive than “one” or “I” or “a body.” *Some* acknowledges difference within the mesh. Again quoting Morton, “Thinking interdependence involves thinking difference. This means confronting the fact that all beings are related to each other negatively and differentially, in an open system without center or edge” (39). Spahr’s word choice and overlapping lines reflect both interdependence and difference: “*Some* of we are all together *in* the grapes” (11, emphasis added). Here then, the *some* of “we” also includes: yeast, seed and sugar, vitamin C and various phytochemicals. Even those smaller components of the grape are separate and distinct actors within the “we.” And “Some of we are all together eating grapes,” and “Some of we let ourselves be all the grapes to be eaten together” (11). We are all of the mesh, living intersectionally with others, constantly shaping and re-shaping our existence and the existence of others through continual, mutual, intra-active touch. Partners in this intra-active touch include the “some of us” that are grapes. The medicinal introduction of grape cells into carcinogenic cells, an interaction that inhibits the growth of cancer, is just one illustrative example of the co-shaping interaction between grapes and humans (Jo et al. 2495; Yadov et al. 478). This interaction demonstrates the kinship between grape cells and human cells, but this relationship does not mean “we” are grapes. Together, with grapes, we become something else.

The next section of the poem introduces “the land” (mineral, earth, ground) into the interconnected relationship between we and some and the grapes:

Some of we and the land that was never ours while we were the land’s...And the land was never ours and the ground was never with us. And yet we were made by the land, by the grapes. We were eating the leaves of the land. The grapes of the land. The green of the land. The leaves. Sheets. And we were the land’s because we were eating and the land let some of us eat. And we were the ground because we eat and the ground let some among us eat. (12)

In this section, Spahr makes use of the pronouns “us” and “ours,” displacing the “we” of the first section. Initially, this displacement seems to posit the land as separate from the “we,” existing *outside* of the mesh. But what these pronouns really do is highlight false presumptions regarding our separateness from, or possession of, the land. In this situation, the use of “we” would imply that we have dominion over the land, that we do things to the land, which is true.

Our presence does shape the land—as anyone with an inkling of environmental awareness knows. Yet, as Spahr’s use of the accusative “us” communicates—the land also does things to *us*, the land shapes *us*. We become who we are together with the land. Because existence is coexistence, the land, or the ground, possesses us as much as we possess it: “[T]he land’s green is the land’s owning of us. And the green of the ground is the possession of the ground of us” (12).

The allusion to Robert Frost’s “The Gift Outright” in this second section indicates Spahr may intend the poem as a response, or corrective, to Frost’s famous inaugural poem. “The Gift Outright” begins, “The land was ours before we were the land’s. / She was our land more than a hundred years / Before we were her people. She was ours...” (1-3). Frost’s repetition of “ours” implies an impossible romantic ownership or dominion over the land, an ownership that Spahr purposefully negates by mixing pronouns. Thus, Spahr turns the Frost poem upside down by placing “the land” in the subject position, a subject in possession of the direct object, “we.”

Righting Frost, Spahr then goes on to actively incorporate the land as emergent within the mesh:

The land is some of us holding out our hand and sparrows are pecking at it eating. The ground is among us giving our hand and the sparrows picotent with it eating. We are all in this world, this world of hands and grain, together. Some of us are sparrows pecking at our hand. Some among us are sparrows picotant with our hand. (13)

This third section also introduces the animal—the sparrow—who is included in “the some of we” eating grapes. The jump from *we* to *us* to *some* to *sparrow* to *grape* to *land* to *sparrow*—this repetitive rolling back on the poem’s nouns and pronouns—mimics the ongoing process of co-existence; or, what Donna Haraway refers to as “the dance of relating.” All the actors—sparrows, humans, land, and grapes—“become who they are *in the dance of relating*, not from scratch, not *ex nihilo*, but full of the patterns of their sometimes-joined, sometimes-separate heritages both before and lateral to *this* encounter. All the dancers are redone through the patterns they enact” (*When Species* 25). Haraway’s point that the dancers and their partners are “not from scratch, not *ex nihilo*,” is an important one. Some of the language I’ve used to discuss this poem has been a bit misleading. My use of the verb “introduce,” as in, “Spahr then introduces the land...,” or “She then introduces the animal,” makes it sound as if the land, and the grapes, and the humans were already in existence before their coming together. However, drawing on Karen Barad’s concept of “intra-activity,” Haraway’s formulation insists the partners do not pre-exist their interaction, but instead become what they are synchronically. The important thing is to realize the dynamic and temporal nature of all partners. Spahr’s “pronoun dance” helps to highlight this temporal nature, and prevents the poem from giving too much priority to a single, solid static subject. The constant movement from the first-person subjective to objective to possessive to the indefinite deprioritizes any single thing as the subject of the poem. Like the mesh itself, there is no center.

In addition to the shifting pronouns, Spahr's cumulative repetition of nouns and verbs also highlights the ongoing negotiations that occur within the mesh:

The sparrows picotent with our hand, picotant with our grain, our hand, our grain, our hand. We are all in this world with sparrows. We all the small ones are in this world with sparrows. With pecking. With the picoter. We are in this hand, in this pecking. We are in this hand, in this picoter. We are all. We all the small ones are. Some of we are pecking back. (13)

In *Poetics of Indeterminacy*, regarding Gertrude Stein's *Three Lives*, Marjorie Perloff writes that Stein's repetitive mode "seeks to enact the rhythm of human change, to show how a relationship, any relationship between two people who are at once the same and different, evolves. This is why repetition is essential. The composition must begin over and over again; the same words...and the same sentences are repeated with slight variation, and gradually everything changes" (93). Stein's other works—most notably *Tender Buttons*—demonstrate that Perloff's above assessment also applies to the rhythm of changing relationships between other living and non-living bodies. Spahr similarly utilizes the repetitive mode to show how any relationship between two partners—living or non-living, human or non-human—is a process of beginning again and again, a process leading to gradual changes inside and outside of each partner, a process both inevitable and possible because of our location in a material form. We are located "in this hand, in this pecking."

The fourth and last section of "Some of We and the Land that was Never Ours" ends with the question of *how*. Acknowledging interconnectedness in a poem is one thing, but how do we begin to actually change the way we think? Spahr's final lines read as follows:

How to move. How to move. How to move from settle on top to inside. How to move stabilization on the top inside. To embrace, to not settle. To embrace, not to arrange. To speak. To speak. To spoke. With the spoke. To poke away at what it is that is wrong in this world we are all in together. To push far what is with it is incorrect in this world which all the small ones are us in the unit. (14)

How to actually change the way we think? How to move the human from on top to *inside* the mesh? Spahr must ask these questions because, as Haraway contends, "the point is not simply to celebrate complexity but to become worldly and respond" (*When Species* 41). The poem recognizes the mesh—the interconnectedness of all living and non-living things—but how to live our lives differently? How to encourage others to live differently? Spahr offers no answer, but the first step must be recognition. Spahr claims writing poetry helps her think, helps her to gather and sort data (Boyko). For Donna Haraway, this thinking and gathering is a form of caring, a way of becoming "subject to the unsettling obligation of curiosity, which requires knowing more at the end of the day than at the beginning. . . . Propelled by the tasty but risky obligation of curiosity among companion species, once we know, we cannot not know. If we know well...we care. That is how responsibility grows" (*When Species* 36, 287). Thus, Spahr's is an ethical project, one concerned with recognizing our entanglements and the necessary responsibility that follows from such awareness.

Spahr's poetry consistently responds to this obligation of curiosity by engaging in interrogative experiment. The point is not so much to come up with a conclusive theory, or answer, but to engage in investigative conversation. When Spahr asks, "How to move from settle on top to inside," an answer is not explicitly given, but nevertheless implied by the poem's very existence. The poem enacts an answer through its interrogation of language. Spahr's use of cumulative repetition and parataxis presents the reader with language written in a linguistically and grammatically "unsanctioned" style, demonstrating that part of the how comes from realizing how the structures of language contribute to keeping humans "on top" and separate from the mesh. Because she does not have a direct answer—and there may not be one anyway—Spahr does what scientists do: she conducts experiments toward the semblance of an answer.

According to Retallack, truly experimental poetry is "something more interesting than the latest stylistic oddities." It is poetry that enacts interrogations into contemporary society's "most problematic structures." As Retallack explains, "A poetics that can operate in the interrogative, with epistemological curiosity and ethical concern, is not so much language as instrument to peer through as instrument of investigative engagement. As such it takes part in the recomposing of contemporary consciousness, contemporary sensibilities." Interrogating the way we describe our position in relation to the land and others is one way to "recompose contemporary consciousness." Experiment involves process and procedure, and in poetry, process leads to form. Part of Spahr's experimental process for "Some of We and the Land that Was Never Ours" involved using an online translation machine. In a note at the end of poem, Spahr tells us she was inspired to write the poem while sitting in a park in France watching someone feed grapes to sparrows. Spahr writes:

I thought about the vines that grew in France, then came as cuttings to California, then went back to France after blight. I thought about who owned what. And divisions. And songs sung in bars. And inaugural poems. I was just trying to figure out this day. I came home and used a translation machine to push my notes back and forth between French and English until a different sort of English came out: this poem. (15, italics in original)

Knowing Spahr's composition procedure allows the reader to understand the poem not as a day in the life of the poet, but to instead see the poem, in the words of Retallack, "on its terms, terms other than those dictated by egoistic desires." The machine filters out the emotional subjective experience of Spahr's tourism, and leaves the investigative "figuring out" of ownership and connectivity as the primary point and purpose. In the passage above, we also have another reference to Frost's "The Gift Outright," the poem read at JFK's inauguration. Spahr's use of the translation machine proposes, in contrast to the Frost poem, that a "different sort of English" may be needed in order to see ourselves as *within* and *of* the mesh. As Retallack observes, "Languages of description may need to change under pressure of new angles of inquiry into how complex interrelationships make sense."

Anti-Colonial Poetry and the Things of Each Possible Relation

Analogy is another “language of description” in need of interrogation. In the six-part poem “Things of Each Possible Relation Hashing Against One Another,” Spahr once again uses the translation machine in order to investigate “the problems of analogy,” as well as the problem of “nature poetry.” As Spahr explains in her procedural notes, the problem with nature poetry, particularly poems celebrating the natural beauty of Hawai’i, is that it takes the venerated subject out of context. Nature poetry tends “to show the beautiful bird but not so often the bulldozer off to the side” (69). Instead of showing how the bird interacts with and changes the larger environment, the bird is portrayed in isolation, removed from the mesh. Spahr compares nature poetry’s active isolation of species with the drawings made by botanical artists during the peak of colonial exploration:

They made drawings of isolated plants against white backgrounds. The drawings are undeniably beautiful. But there is little reference to where the plants grow or what grows near them or what birds rested in them or ate their seeds and fruits or what bees or moths came to spread their pollen or how humans used them or avoided them. I [see] nature poetry as being in this tradition of isolation. (69, italics in original)

This tradition of isolation is symptomatic of the artificial Nature-Culture divide that has no place in ecopoetics or posthumanist thought. Spahr’s concern with the Nature-Culture divide—a divide at the heart of racism and imperialism—is deeply connected to her concerns with anti-colonization and the problems of analogy. As Haraway explains, analogy implies sameness by naming a parallel relation that “logically” allows “rational man” to dominate and oppress by pitching all of man’s Others—the colonized, the enslaved, vegetable, and animal—into one pile on the other side of the divide (*When Species* 18).

Therefore, “Things of Each Possible Relation” is the result of an experimental inquiry into the problem of “nature” poetry, while also an interrogation of the problem of analogy and colonization of the Hawaiian Islands. Spahr’s investigative method involves the literal “hashing” of words, a procedure that writes nature as interconnected with culture as opposed to nature in isolation. Again, quoting from Spahr’s procedural notes:

I wrote first drafts of many of these poems during class lectures in Ethnobotany 101.⁶ After I wrote first drafts, I put the drafts through the altavista translation machine (world.altavista.com) and translated my English words between the languages that came to the Pacific from somewhere else: French, Spanish, German, and Portuguese. The translation machine is of course full of flaws and offers back some sort of language that only alludes to sense because it is so connected with another language. I like this about it. Then, after I had a number of different versions of the same poem, I sat down and wove them together. I wanted to weave them into complicated, unrecognizable patterns. I took the patterns from the math that shows up in plants. Or I tried to approximate the shapes of things I saw around me. (71, italics in original)

By using the translation machine as textual intermediary, Spahr creates a poetry that does not adhere to the expected rules of written communication. By devaluing the accepted structures of the (English) language, Spahr engages in what Haraway calls “the struggle against perfect communication, against the one code that translates all meaning perfectly, the central dogma of phallogocentrism [and Eurocentrism]” (*Simians* 176). To hash is “to cut up, to slash or hack about; to mangle.”⁷ Spahr mangles the discourse of Western colonialism and imperialism—the discourse perpetuating the Nature-Culture divide as a means of exclusion and control. As I discuss in more detail below, analogy contributes to the violence and justification of colonialism by perpetuating a singular perspective that reduces everything to type. Spahr’s verbal slashing and hacking overrides the code of analogy that helps construct oppositions created by the will to truth in discourse. Because Spahr cannot escape discourse, because there is no accessible Truth beyond language, the best she can do is analyze the power structure of language by attending to and altering the appearance and regularity of discourse.⁸

Hash as a noun refers to “a mixture of mangled and incongruous fragments; a medley; a spoiled mixture; a mess, jumble;” a description that sounds a lot like Morton’s mesh. Spahr cuts up and creates a hash out of the “two views that define the Pacific: a view from the sea (the view of those who arrived from elsewhere) and the view from the land (those who were already there)” (71). The first section of “Things of Each Possible Relation” begins with the view of those who arrived from elsewhere:

the view from the sea
the constant motion of claiming, collecting, changing, and taking
.....
the constant movement to claim, to gather, to change, and to consider sea
the arrival to someplace differently
constant motion
the green of the soil which increases the freshness of things
then calmness and the sail
the requirement on meeting to modify and to regard
the inbound of this someplace differently
the constant movement (55)

Just as in “Some of We and the Land that was Never Ours,” repetition plays a crucial role in communicating concepts of kinship and interconnectedness. In this 37-line section, the phrase “constant motion” or “constant movement” is repeated seven times. The repetition of this phrase (and other phrases) echoes the motion of the sea, the constant back and forth movement of the waves rolling and receding over the land. But it also mimics the constant

fluctuation and mutating change inherent in coexistence. When species meet, species change. Every intra-action between entities—living and non-living—leads to change. Line 14, “the requirement on meeting to modify and regard” (55), expresses the unavoidable *becoming with* that happens when bodily figures touch. When species meet, each one is inevitably changed in some subtle or not so subtle way; there is an unavoidable “requirement” to change, to modify. Recognizing the mesh and learning to live intersectionally with others also requires regarding others with respect. Again quoting Haraway: “To hold in regard, to respond, to look back reciprocally, to notice, to pay attention, to have courteous regard for, to esteem: all of that is tied to polite greeting, to constituting the polis, where and when species meet” (*When Species* 19). Regarding others becomes an ethical act when it alerts us to our entanglements with other bodies, (hopefully) enabling us to make better decisions.

Spahr’s poetic project acknowledges the necessity of “regarding others” while pointing out that this was/is not a view shared by those coming from the sea; “the requirement to modify and regard” carried (and still carries) a very different meaning for those arriving from elsewhere. When the colonizer arrived and saw “someplace differently,” he felt required to modify the land, to make it congruent with his ideas and concepts of reality. And what he couldn’t make *same*, he made subservient. Alternate meanings of regard include “to look after oneself” and “to set value”—the colonizer regards himself and, setting various values on human and non-humans as he sees fit, places all others on the opposite side of divide. The colonizer relies on the definition of regard that falls in line with the structures of capitalism; however, learning to live intersectionally with others requires something more akin to Haraway’s definition of regard.

Spahr employs the same double meaning effect in line 32: “the sea is modified and urges considerations” (56). Explorers (re)mapped and therefore modified European knowledge of the sea: they “discovered” other lands and species—a discovery that demanded “consideration.” Like “regard,” the noun “consideration” has several meanings. It can mean “regard for the circumstances, feelings, comfort, etc. of another; thoughtfulness for another;” or consideration can mean “something given in payment; a reward, remuneration; a compensation, equivalent.” Unfortunately, again the imperial view from the sea is more familiar with the second definition; the colonial encounter with others is always based on profit and gain.

Spahr’s “hashing” process indicates a poet who values composition as much as, or more than, content. As Rosemarie Waldrop explains, when the poet’s focus is on composition as process, “the aim is not unifying ([finding] the one right word, the one perfect metaphor), but to open the form to the multiplicity of contexts...The transcendence is not upward, but horizontal, contextual. It is the transcendence of language with its infinite possibilities, infinite connections, and its charge of the past” (203). The process of composition leads to an organic parataxis allowing Spahr’s lines to convey these multiple meanings. The process enables this first section of the poem to simultaneously reveal what *should* have happened when “the view from the sea” and “the view from the land” came together—a *becoming with* based on respect and regard; and what did (or does) happen when these views meet—modifications based on personal gain and situated in an ignorance of interconnectedness.

Those arriving from elsewhere are characterized by the continuous motion of “claiming, collecting, changing, and taking”—all acts of modification, but also verbs indicative of control. The travelers from abroad see themselves as *on top* instead of *within* the mesh. This failure to recognize leads the travelers to exert control and “modify by considerations.” It is a problem of perspective: the traveler’s knowledge of the sea is a situated knowledge based on the Western point of view. Although their knowledge is changed and modified by “discoveries” of various island groups, the change is still always framed by the Western imperial perspective of mark and control. As Haraway notes, “Cartographic practice inherently is learning to make projections that shape worlds in particular ways for various purposes. Each projection produces and implies specific sorts of perspective” (*Modest* 132). Spatialization is always social, historical, and cultural. As the first documented European to discover and map the Hawaiian Islands, Captain James Cook set in motion a power-laced process of spatialization, a process by which Westerners fetishized the “mapped” islands as a bounded space of land, people, and resources waiting to be conquered.⁹ Drawing on Marx’s concept of commodity fetishism, Haraway describes mapping as a metaphorical practice that becomes dangerous when maps are fetishized into literal “metaphor-free representations, more or less accurate, of previously existing, ‘real’ properties of a world that are waiting patiently to be plotted” (*Modest* 135). Haraway compares the mapping of the human genome to the mapping of the earth during the Age of Exploration—both endeavors are about mastery and control of “Life Itself.” The fetishizing of maps (and genes) obscures the “relations among humans and between humans and non-humans that generate both objects and value... [and gives way to] a philosophical-cognitive *error* that mistakes potent abstractions for concrete entities, which themselves are ongoing events” (*Modest* 147, emphasis in original). By “mapping” each section of *Well Then There Now*, as discussed earlier, Spahr reimagines cartographic practice while, via her poems, calling attention to inscribed cultural hierarchies inherent in colonization’s remapping of space.

As Spahr points out in the second section of the poem, the problem with “the sight from the sea” is that those who see from this perspective do not understand that their charting of the land does not make the island a concrete object. The map is just a trope. The literalization of the trope masks the mesh, and they do not see that every human and non-human is always in the process of *becoming with*. For Haraway, organisms are “cascades of action,” never “things-in-themselves” (*Modest* 142). The colonizers do not understand the island as an “ongoing event” full of fluid definitions and multiple viabilities. The second section begins by introducing the problems of analogy as a concretizing trope:

what we know is like and unlike

as it is kept in different shaped containers

it is as the problems of analogy

it as the view from the sea

it is as the introduction of plants and animals, others, exotically

yet it is also as the way of the wood borer
and the opinion of the sea
as it is as the occidental concepts of government, commerce, money and
imposing
what we know is like and unlike
one stays diverse with formed packages
that is what the problems of the analogy are (56)

Here, just as in “Some of We and the Land that Was Never Ours,” the “we” encompasses all living and non-living things. The problem with analogy is that it elides the fact that we are “diverse” within and without our “formed packages.” Though we are kept in “different shaped containers,” we are still always alike and unlike. We are alike in that we are organisms, or things, always in constant interaction with others, always *becoming with* others, but we are never becoming the *exact same* as others. The boundaries are both thin and rigid.

Just as the colonial settlers saw (or continue to see) what they want to see: a group of islands contained within a map; a container with land, plants, animals, and people—a container that the settlers believe should function similar to their “container” of origin. Those coming from the sea wanted to see a “sameness” so they could justify making the land *theirs*. Seeing what they wanted to see, the colonizers moved their system of “western concepts of government, trade, money, and imposition” (Spahr 57) across boundaries, without realizing (or wanting to realize) the islands had their own internal systems of education, religion, and justice.

As Spahr explains in “Dole Street,” one of the essays included in *Well Then There Now*, to celebrate the syncretism of Hawai’i is to “erase the power dynamics that make it a colonial state” (48). To celebrate Hawai’i as an eclectic mix of immigrant and indigenous cultures is to overlook the “fact that certain people had to meet the values, languages, and desires of certain others who suddenly arrived because they could not survive otherwise while those who arrived had a choice about whether they would meet the values, languages, and desires of those who were present” (48). Those arriving from the continent brought with them “western education and its separations and refusals to mix” (49). Instead of realizing that the way of the West is both like and unlike the way of the islands, instead of recognizing the potential to become something else together, those arriving from the sea modified the land with selfish regard.

However, Spahr has no illusions about returning to a pre-colonial or pre-global state. The bodies living in and visiting Hawai’i, native and invasive, human and non-human—the *we* of this world—are “consequently” together. To attempt to go back and forge rigid boundaries between native and invasive is to remain tied to false constructions of Nature (as well as Culture). The dream of a pre-colonial, pre-global, pre-anything world fails to acknowledge the constantly shifting, changing nature of the mesh. As Karen Barad explains in *Meeting the Universe Halfway*, “Bodies are not situated *in* the world; they are part *of* the world....the world

is an ongoing intra-active engagement, and bodies are among the differential performances of the world's dynamic intra-activity, in an endless re-configuring of boundaries and properties" (376, emphasis in original). Bodies are always already changing; there is no pure or natural order to return to: "Embodiment is a matter not of being specifically situated in the world, but rather of being of the world in its dynamic specificity" (Barad 377).

This ongoing, dynamic engagement is reflected in "Things of Each Possible Relation," which means the introduction of Western concepts and "the introduction of the plants and the animals, others, exotic" will continue to become "the various compositions formed by nature" (64). The "series of large and extremely rapid changes / turns into the view of the view" and "one continues to be the various formed assemblies which are / the problems of analogy" (64). Whereas the first section began with the view from the sea, a view that mistakenly desires to make everything the same, the sixth and final section portrays the view from the land as a view that accepts "the lack of uniformity [that] fixes the earth" (66). The view from the land is the view of "the network of a boat and of sound bough and the candle and the never stop of the movement / things of any relation transformed to be different than that one" (66). The view from the land is always a view of a boat arriving and bringing change, bringing others to participate in the dance of relating. After all, the early Polynesians also came to Hawai'i from somewhere else, and they also introduced invasive species and engaged in habitat modification.¹⁰ Instead of a nostalgic longing for a past that never was, Spahr is concerned with "imagining an anti-colonial, anti-global world" (Bettridge 3). A colonial state is characterized by oppression, destruction, and the imposition of a singular way of being. An anti-colonial state is one committed to embracing multiple viabilities and living with respect and regard for other species.

In the poem sequence, "Sonnets," Spahr subverts the familiar western lyric form by using it to express collective, as opposed to subjective, experience while also promoting an anti-colonial state. The formal choice of the sonnet is particularly apt considering the English form became popular as Britain embarked on its massive centuries-long colonial project. Later, British literature, exemplified by Shakespeare's sonnets, would be utilized and celebrated by Victorian and early 20th century literary critics who hoped "literary transcendence" could quell lower-class unrest, as well as indigenous rebellions in the empire's vast colonies. In 1921, the critic Dover Wilson, quoting Wordsworth, reported his belief that the lower classes should be convinced literature creates "a fellowship which 'binds together by passion and knowledge the vast empire of human society, as it is spread over the whole earth, and over all time'" (qtd. in Matz 196). As Robert Matz points out, Wilson is "speaking the language of colonialism" and British upper-class superiority:

The vast empire that has spread over human society at the time of Wilson's report was really the British empire. And the bonds by which it drew peoples together were not just those of good fellowship...the relationship between colonizer and colonized could be imagined as reconciled on the higher plane of literature, which transcended time and place. This transcendence was the shadow of empire, both literally and ideologically. Literally, the British empire

spread British writing over the globe, making it appear to be universal. Ideologically, the idea of universality of English writers like Shakespeare suggested the cultural superiority of Great Britain, and hence its entitlement to rule the inferior and merely particular culture of the colonized. (196)

In her critical discussion of Bernadette Mayer's *Sonnets*, Spahr argues that revising western poetic forms, as Mayer does, "provokes anxiety" by "illustrating that western forms are not necessarily natural (but are contested spaces)." In the process, the social institutions and norms enforced by western forms are also displaced as "not necessarily natural" ("Love" 98). In the case of Spahr's "Sonnets," transcendent imperialism promoted via Shakespeare by critics like Dover, is the "social institution" being contested.

Spahr's sonnets are influenced by, or at least share lineage with Mayer's *Sonnets*,¹¹ of which Spahr writes: "While the lyric is a form that in most instances is all tied up with the 'poetic' (with individualism, with assumptions about aesthetics and greatness, with romantic and courtly love), [Mayer's] sonnets refigure lyric intimacy as collective and connective spaces" (98-99). Spahr similarly refigures lyric intimacy, but instead of focusing on sexuality and urban space as Mayer does, Spahr revises the colonialist narrative of dominance and beneficence; illustrating the intimate connective and collective space of Hawai'i as it has been re-shaped by material-semiotic interchanges between native and non-native inhabitants.

"Sonnets" is a sequence of six sonnets investigating the relationship between native and non-native, what it means to identify and be identified as one or the other, and like everything in Spahr's oeuvre, demonstrates interconnectedness. Originally published under the title "Blood Sonnets," Complete Blood Count (CBC) data is interwoven throughout the 14-lines of the four middle sonnets. The inclusion of blood test results is particularly salient considering the blood quantum logic that pervades identification practices in Hawai'i. In accordance with the Hawaiian Homes Commission Act (HHCA) of 1921, the current legal definition of "native Hawaiian" is a "descendant with at least one-half blood quantum of individuals inhabiting the Hawaiian Islands prior to 1778" (Kauanui 2). The HHCA was billed as an attempt to rehabilitate and revitalize the Native Hawaiian population through the allotment of 200,000 acres of land to be parceled out to Native Hawaiians. Lobbied for by the colonial sugar industry (in the hopes of eventually gaining control of more land), the 50-percent rule "simultaneously created a class of people who could no longer qualify for the land that constitutes the Hawaiian Home Lands territory," thereby undercutting "indigenous Hawaiian epistemologies that define identity on the basis of one's kinship and genealogy," while displacing a large portion of indigenous people (3). Because the state of Hawai'i still continues to use the 50-percent blood quantum rule to evaluate claims to indigeneity, many Native Hawaiians have abandoned inclusive kinship practices for the more exclusionary colonial taxonomy. As a result, "those who do not meet the 50-percent blood rule are often seen as 'lesser than,' where [Native Hawaiians] are divided into two classes with one assuming dominance over the other" (5). The colonial imposition of blood quantum has had disastrous political effects on indigenous people, because, as J. Kēhaulani Kauanui argues in *Hawaiian Blood*, "indigenous self-determination can never be untangled from discourses and relations of domination, as Native peoples struggle for greater self-

determination and political power, they simultaneously challenge and reproduce some of these very same dynamics and processes” (9).

The charting of blood quantum is similar to gene mapping, which Haraway describes as “a kind of corporeal fetishism that denies the ongoing action and work that it takes to sustain technoscientific material-semiotic bodies in the world.” Like gene fetishism, blood quantum logic “involves ‘forgetting’ that bodies are in webs of integrations, forgetting the tropic quality of all knowledge claims” (*Modest* 142). Blood quantum logic denies the multiple ways to identify as Hawaiian; it also denies that we are all material-semiotic entities engaged in constant co-shaping. Spahr’s “Sonnets” de-concretizes the CBC by engaging both the biological *and* cultural components of our existence:

white blood cells at 4.2 thousand per cubic millimeter | As intricate system we
are.

red blood cells at 3.88 million per cubic millimeter | We with all with our
complexities.

hemoglobin at 14.1 grams per decaliter | We with all our identifications.
hematocrit at 42.6% | We with all our homes and irregularities live. (21)¹²

This first stanza of the second sonnet suggests we are more than just the biological charting of our physical bodies. We are not pure or static, but full of “irregularities” based on our various semiotic “identifications.” As the second stanza claims, “We are full of thought and we live” in and through various situated knowledges; we “live with things several” (21).

The four “blood” sonnets are book-ended by sonnets that interrogate the poet’s own position as someone who arrived and changed the land. The sonnets are a “working through” of Spahr’s own complicity in the colonial project as someone who moved to Hawai’i from the mainland and taught at the University of Hawai’i for six years. The first sonnet begins: “We arrived. / We arrived by air, by 747 and DC10 and L1001” (19). Although the speaker and her companions arrived by air, their experience echoes the experience of those who arrived by sea in “Things of Each Possible Relation.” When they “arrived and then walked into this green,” the speaker and her companions noticed:

Things were different.

The air was moist and things were different.

Plants grew into and on top of and around each other and things were different.

The arrival of those before us made things different.

We tried not to notice but as we arrived we became a part of arriving and making
different.

We grew into it but with complicities and assumptions and languages. (19)

Like those who arrived by sea, the speaker notices things are different. But instead of trying to “modify” and control, the speaker *acknowledges* she is bringing her own tropes and assumptions to the islands, *acknowledges* she is complicit in making things different. The final couplet takes an interrogative turn: “Asking what this means matters. / And the answer also matters” (19). By asking what it means to be a part of “making different,” Spahr is again responding to the obligation of curiosity, the obligation to care enough to interrogate the problematic structures of society. Moving through the sonnets—as she interrogates blood quantum logic, methods of identification, and who “authorizes so one is not what individual one says one is” (27)—Spahr also arrives at a sort of answer to “what this means.” The last sonnet concludes:

and because we could not
begin to understand that this place was not ours until we
grew and flowed into something other than what we were we
continued to make things worse for this place of growing
and flowing into even while some of us came to love it and let
it grow in our own hearts, flow in our own blood. (29)

Recognizing her complicity in “making things worse,” Spahr also importantly acknowledges the need to resist static definition and categories, the need to *become with* others into something else.

In her review of *Well Then There Now*, Susan Schultz claims Hawaiian blood quantum politics has worked “against the creation of alliances across categories, especially racial ones,” ignoring the “(inclusive) *urgent* need to come together in opposition to military build-up, environmental destruction, houselessness, the third-worldization of Hawai‘i. And against globalization” (emphasis in original). While acknowledging the negative effects of colonization, by re-writing the lyric “I” as a “we,” Spahr also, as Schultz contends, asks the important question, “Are we we because we belong to one or another group, or because we care about this place?”

The Politics of Location

Living in Hawai‘i, Spahr felt a need to think about “how to make a syncretism that matters,” and about how “to acknowledge and how to change in various unpredictable ways” (*Well* 49). Spahr’s self-interrogations speak to the necessity of acknowledging multiple viabilities, multiple ways of being, and accepting our bodies (ourselves) as dynamic shifting material-semiotic entities entangled in the mesh. As *Well Then There Now* demonstrates, Spahr understands herself as an embodied subject whose actions affect and shape other living and non-living beings across time, space, and place. She understands herself as being located in and of a body—a white, female body; a body identified as a U.S. citizen; a body born and raised in the

working class town of Chillicothe, Ohio, but also a nomadic body moving between New York, California, and Hawai'i. For this reason, *Well Then There Now* is not just about Hawai'i, it is also about the other locations Spahr's body has traveled and the way these intersections have shaped and continue to shape her own subjectivity and the subjectivity of others.

Her body is marked by not just spatial location, but also by her body's historical location in time. Acknowledging her nomadic temporal and spatial subjectivity allows Spahr to foster an awareness of her interconnectedness with the colonial history of Hawai'i, reaching as far back as the 1778 landing of the HMS *Discovery* in Kealahou Bay. This acknowledgement also, as in the long poem "Incinerator," enables Spahr to express an understanding of the ways her body is entangled with a variety of material-semiotic nodes—from the paper mill in Chillicothe, to the polluted streams and rivers in Appalachia to "the women across many different nations" who have been "adversely impacted" by the U.S. government's manipulation of trade barriers (147). In "Unnamed Dragonfly Species," a 19-page prose poem, Spahr again acknowledges her complicity with the U.S. government by exploring the connections between bodies privileged with U.S. citizenship, the melting Antarctic Pine Island glacier, and climate change:

They felt they had to say that they knew they were in part responsible for it, whatever it was that was causing this, because they lived in the place that used the largest amount of stuff most likely to cause this warming. **Northern Wild Monk's-hood** They lived among those who used the most stuff up, who burned the most stuff, who produced the most stuff... (86-87)

Despite living in New York, thousands of miles from Antarctica and the melting glacier, "they" understand that "they still benefitted and were part of the system" responsible for not only global climate change, but also for a growing list of endangered species (87). The inclusion of "Northern Wild Monk's-hood" in the passage above might seem like an out of place, lexical slip, but the endangered wildflower has just as much to do with the mesh as the anonymous "they" pondering the melting glaciers. This entanglement of species is metaphorically demonstrated through Spahr's cutting and hashing into her prose poem the list of endangered and threatened plant and wildlife species of New York, a list acquired from the New York State Department of Environmental Conservation. Starting with "A Noctuid Moth" and ending with the "Yellow-breasted Chat," Spahr alphabetically feeds the entire list into the poem by inserting a species name after each full sentence:

Horned Lark Would the Antarctic Pine Island glacier melt just on its own, they would wonder? **Houghton's Goldenrod** Wouldn't the Vatnajökull also be melting at the same time? **Humpback Whale** And the alps and the tropical caps and the poles? **Indiana Bat** (82)

Spahr's cutting up and "recycling" of the New York State endangered species list into her own poetic prose communicates the entangled connections we rarely see, unless we stop to think and read between the lines.¹³ The insertion of a species after each sentence effectively "interrupts" the human-centered thoughts of a speaker who is certainly focusing on a human "they," reminding the reader that climate change also affects the non-human inhabitants of

earth. Attempting to move through the poem, the reader “bumps” into a variety of plants and animals until he or she comes to realize, much like the “they” in the poem, that “the systems of relation between living things of all sorts seemed to have become in recent centuries so hierarchically human that things were dying at an unprecedented rate” (93). Paradoxically, as the reader moves through the 19-page poem, he or she also “learns” to skip over, or ignore, the inserted endangered species. Recognizing that the poem is easier to read if one just skips over the species, the reader (and Spahr) produces a statement, or model, of the always “easier” approach to environmental issues—pretend they don’t exist.

Spahr’s inclusive poetics confronts this mode of detachment. The poem concludes with the speaker admitting “they” are “anxious and paralyzed by the largeness and the connectedness of systems,” and although “they” understand their own relation and connectedness, they “still don’t know what else to do” (92-93). As with “Some of the We and the Land that Was Never Ours,” Spahr does not present solutions, instead “Unnamed Dragonfly Species” exemplifies a crucial first step: the obligation to think, investigate, and recognize. Spahr’s concern with the politics of location is crucial to this recognition. Embracing what Braidotti calls “a nomadic vision of the subject,” Spahr understands location as “an embedded and embodied memory...a materialist temporal and spatial site of co-production of the subject” (*Transpositions* 29). Taking into account our location in a body with various temporal and spatial attachments, Spahr is able to understand that although the speaker is in New York, she is intricately connected to the melting glacier. Recognizing our subjectivity as “nomadic,” makes it harder to claim innocence or disconnect from what’s happening “over there.”

Spahr’s interrogative and experimental form may result in varying line-by-line readings of her work, but the larger political intent and meaning of the entire piece is always readily available. This “local” indeterminacy indicates Spahr understands her own subjectivity in terms of “multiple belongings” and “constant flows of transformation” (Braidotti, *Transpositions* 17). By “combining self-interests with the well-being of an enlarged sense of community, which includes one’s territorial or environmental interconnections,” Spahr’s poetry engages in what Braidotti calls a “nomadic eco-philosophy of multiple belongings” (*Transpositions* 35). As I discussed earlier, *Well Then There Now* illustrates this conceptually via Spahr’s inclusion of composition locations. The title also speaks to concepts of temporal and spatial interconnectedness. One understanding of the meaning behind the title, *Well Then There Now*, could be: “It is well to see that then and there is also now.” The *then*—both historical time past and personal time past—and the *there*—historical and personal locations—have made Spahr who she is *now*; have in fact, made us all who and what we are now. The title also instructs us on the importance of the present. *Well Then There Now* communicates the need to recognize our entanglements with all living and non-living matter and to act with respect and regard for other humans and other species *now*, because what we do now will certainly indicate the future we become. However, recognizing how we are shaped by temporal and spatial location does not mean dwelling in the past, nor does it mean we should obsessively cling to the notion of “origins” as defining who we or others are. Instead, as Adrienne Rich instructs in “Notes Toward a Politics of Location,” the places we come from—the *then* and *there* of our lives—

should influence “our own continuing actions in the present” and serve as both a reminder and “a goad to continuing and changing responsibility” (227).

Part of fostering an attitude of continuing and changing responsibility includes embracing inclusivity and understanding our own position as an emergent, dynamic *becoming with*. *Well Then There Now* communicates this message via a poetics based on inclusiveness. In her exploratory poetry—a poetic hybrid of prose, critical documentary, borrowed text, borrowed languages, photos and other images—Spahr conveys the entangled stratum of history, biology, technology, and naturecultures that comprise the complex figures we continuously become. In the wake of unprecedented globalization and scientific and technological advances, ethical poetic projects that promote awareness of our bodily entanglements are increasingly important.

Endnotes

¹ Keller cites the work of Robinson Jeffers, Wendell Berry, and Gary Snyder—whom she calls the “triumvirate of white men” most associated with nature poetry—as exemplary of nature poetry that romanticizes a wilderness invested with spiritual value as a “nature” that is distinct and separate from suburban and urban areas.

² For various discussions regarding second- and third-generation Language poets, see Wallace; Altieri; and the anthology *Telling It Slant: Avant-Garde Poetics of the 1990s*, edited by Wallace and Marks.

³ Spahr has published a total of four book length poetry collections. The first, *Response* (1996), winner of the National Poetry Series Award, also addresses connectivity, but without any overt reference to nonhuman others.

⁴ For an eco-critical reading of *this connection of everyone with lungs*, see Arigo.

⁵ The concept of “enaction” describes cognitive thought as resulting from an organism’s physical interaction with the environment. See Hayles 154-158; and Varela, Thompson, and Rosch.

⁶ Earlier, Spahr explains that she enrolled in an ethnobotany course in order to “think more” about the problem of nature poetry and learn more about the history of Hawai’i. I see Spahr’s enrollment in the course as both fulfilling Haraway’s “obligation of curiosity” and participating in Retallack’s experimental interrogation.

⁷ All quoted definitions are from the *Oxford English Dictionary Online*.

⁸ For more on language and discourse as a form of control, see Foucault.

⁹ For a better understanding of European and American colonization of the Hawaiian Islands, see Kinzer 9-108; Merry; and Kauanui.

¹⁰ See Kirch for a discussion of the prehistoric Hawaiian ecosystem.

¹¹ Spahr’s sonnets were originally published in *Conjunctions* in 2000. Spahr’s article on Mayer, “‘Love Scattered, Not Concentrated Love’: Bernadette Mayer’s Sonnets,” was published in the first half of 2001.

¹² I’ve typeset the lines to reflect how Spahr has read the poem in oral performances. In *Well Then There Now*, the CBC data is printed on the verso page, but right justified so that the lines run into the lines on the recto page. Spahr reads the lines as though they were 14 long lines running straight across both pages. Reading the sonnets this way re-enforces the entanglements of biology (or nature) and culture. See Spahr’s PENNSOUND page to hear a recording of Spahr reading “Sonnets”: <http://writing.upenn.edu/pennsound/x/Spahr.php>.

¹³ For an interesting discussion of ecopoetics and the practice of recycling text, see Tarlo.

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